Playful Identity Walkthrough

A new mixed methods approach to study
playful behaviour and online identities
within social media apps

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Preface

The last two years I have done research into: playful identities in tv shows (2018); the LinkedIn app within a participatory culture (2019), the power struggle between tech and human on social media (2019), and how LinkedIn shapes users' online identity through a playful way (2019). As a new media and digital culture scholar I have developed a strong interest into the relationship and intersections between social media, identity and the concept of play. Therefore, I have decided to close of my master's programme of New Media and Digital Culture at the University of Utrecht with a research into playful identities and social media.

This research is written for anyone interested in learning more about learning more about the methodology of online identity research. In addition, since I am coming from a design background myself, this influences my way of thinking and writing during this research. Therefore, this research could also be useful for designers. I hope to inspire others to do further research into this field of study.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Imar, for his excellent guidance. Thank you, Mirko, for your inspiring feedback.

A big thanks to my family and friends who supported me during this process.

I hope you enjoy reading this thesis.

Renate Seegers

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Abstract

With the global number of mobile phone users growing steadily, the number of app downloads is also expected to increase (Clement 2019). App's affordances are shaping our online identity. Affordances are functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object (Hutchby 2001; 5). These affordances determine the possibilities and constraints to play and experiment with our online identity within the social media app. People play and are pushing the boundaries of a social media apps (Van Dijck and Poell 2013, de Lange et al. 2015). This has an impact on our culture. For example, catfishing, having fake profiles online, and buying status. The limits of shaping our online identity are widening with newer online platforms (Rogers 2013; 155), which is why there is a need of methodologies to study this phenomenon. The walkthrough method is most suitable for analysing apps in a structured way focusing on the intended goal and use (Light, Burgess and Duguay 2018). However, the walkthrough method is too generic (Gerrard 2018, Dieter et al. 2019) when trying to investigate the playful behaviour of users with their online identity. Other methods, like an affordance analysis and game analysis, better understand online identity, play and playful identities have been studied in this research. I argue that these existing methods do not fully cover this playful behaviour, and therefore it is necessary to propose a new mixed methods approach. This research discusses the overlapping and integration of the walkthrough method and affordance analysis. This is based on a theoretical framework about online identity and playful behaviour within social media. Three things spring to attention in a new method called the Playful Identity Walkthrough:

    (1) The balance between wat is made possible and what is made desirable within the app.

    (2) The process and elements that affects users' online identities during the technical walkthrough.

    (3) How a playful environment is created and how playful behaviour is being controlled and managed by the app's affordances during the technical walkthrough.

These three new focus points resulted in three interventions of the walkthrough method by Light et al. (2018). These interventions are: the addition of the balance element within the analysis of the environment of expected use, the focus on online identity and discarding the logbook during the technical walkthrough, and the addition of the mediator characteristics *hidden affordances* and *game elements* during the technical walkthrough. Because of these interventions, the Playful Identity Walkthrough allows us to dive deeper into the phenomena of playful identities. By diving deeper more knowledge is gained about the role app developers and an app's affordances have in constructing and maintaining playful identities within social media apps.

Keywords: social media apps, playful behaviour, online identity, methodological research, the walkthrough method.

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1. Warming up and entering the field

Apps are a significant component of digital culture and the digital economy. Social media are popular stages for self-expression, communication and self-promotion (Van Dijck 2013; 199). Furthermore, our social media profiles provide more insight into who we are. People explore aspects of themselves by playing. Even those aspects that are impossible or forbidden outside the game (Jansz 2015; 263). Our culture is becoming more playful, resulting in playful behaviour on social media apps. Social media apps have playful qualities (de Lange et al. 2015; 263), thus social media apps are platforms on which playful behaviour is currently happening more and more (Consalvo and Vázquez 2014; 1688). The limits to author oneself and play with our online identities are widening with newer online platforms (Rogers 2013; 155). Because there are more opportunities within the apps, existing methods are no longer adequate. Therefore, I will research which methodology is suitable to study these new possibilities.

1.1 About the walkthrough method

Light, Burgess and Duguay (2018) have introduced the walkthrough method to "dig deeper into how apps frame users' self-expression, relationships and interactions" (897). The walkthrough method is a way of interacting directly with an app's interface to examine its technological mechanisms and the embedded cultural references (Light et al. 2018). This enables you to better understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences. This method distinguishes from other methods, for example an affordance analysis (Hutchby 2001), because it has a focus on analysing the interaction between the user (the researcher) and the object (the app's interface). This walkthrough method by Light et al. (2018) is the most appropriate method to analyse how identities (culture) are constructed and shaped through social media apps (technology). There are multiple arguments to support this.

Firstly, the walkthrough method provides a systematic approach to uncover elements that can be overlooked in broader analyses. It focuses not only on how users' online identity could be shaped through the affordances, but also through the app's vision, operating model and governance (Light et al. 2018; 897). Secondly, the walkthrough method allows researchers to analyse a set of expectations for ideal use by analysing the app's vision, operating model and governance (Light et al. 2018; 896). This results in a better understanding of the intended use of app developers and provides a sense of how individuals could resist these intentions. Finally, the walkthrough method invites the researcher to "engage closely with the app, using a step-by-step walkthrough technique that involves progressing through the app's requirements, screens, and activities to understand how it guides users" (Light et al. 2018; 885). This step-by-step walkthrough provides new insights that other methods (like affordance analysis, that studies objects only from the outside) cannot provide.

On the other hand, Rogers (2013; 154) argues that since the existence of "post demographics" new methods for the study of social networks are invited. The interest has shifted from traditional demographics (race, ethnicity, age, etc.) to post demographics (tastes, interests, favourites, groups, etc.)

(Rogers 2013; 154). This means more information is not only being asked of users but also that more information about users' preferences are being collected and stored. After setting up a profile, the platforms continually encourage more activity (adding friends, liking content and joining groups). Because of the increase of activities, the opportunities for analysis appear to be boundless (Rogers 2013; 155). However, there are some constraints of analysing these user activities. Not all social media apps are scrapable, and it is not always acceptable to gather data. As a solution, the walkthrough method frames the researcher as a user of the platform they are analysing themselves, which means they are studying an app from the inside (Light et al. 2018).

1.2 Criticism

Although the walkthrough method is a well-developed method that brings lots of interesting and new insights to the surface, there are some shortcoming to understand the playful behaviour with an users' online identity within social media apps. Light et al. (2018) recommend analysing the app's interface and environment of expected use. This can be done by interviews or other data-gathering methods. They (Light et al. 2018) also recommend investigating user-led activities, artefacts or services associated with the app next to user deviations from the designer's original vision (e.g. choosing not to complete certain profile fields) (895). Based on this recommendation, I argue that Light et al. recognize that unexpected user practices and playful behaviour is happening within apps. However, these recommendations are not embedded within the walkthrough method itself.

Most interesting is that these acts of unexpected user practices tell us that users have the power to use the app differently than it is designed and developed for. Users are creating new goals and ambitions for the use of the app. These unexpected user practices show a shift of power from designers to users (Eglash, 2004). Another point of view, Dieter et al. (2019) argue that "app developers aim to get their users to do specific things—to change their behaviour—and the walkthrough method can be used to reflect this behavioural focus" (5). Thus, the walkthrough method has potential to uncover changes of user behaviour. However, as Dieter et al. (2019) point out that the walkthrough method is ideal to examine ideal user types and practices (5), but not to examine non-ideal user types and practices. Summarized, the walkthrough method does not offer enough tools to analyse these unexpected user practices. I want to find out if the walkthrough method by Light et al. (2018) is sufficient enough for analysing both the ideal and non-ideal user types.

Most studies using the walkthrough method by Light et al. (2018) have a focus other than online identities and/or playful identities. For example, representation of social groups on social media (Duguay 2020), understanding mobile payments as social media (Acker and Murthy 2018), self-tracking apps (Berg 2017) and algorithms on social media (Gerrard 2018). Therefore, I argue that the walkthrough method is being used for a lot of different subjects to study and not necessarily has to be used solely for online identities and playful identities. To study online identities on social media, Bucher

and Helmond (2017), for example, use an affordance analysis. boyd (2010) uses an affordance analysis to show how the affordances of networked publics are informed by the properties of bits and highlighting common dynamics that emerge from those affordances. In addition, a lot of comparative analysis between multiple social network sites (Van Dijck 2013; Papacharissi 2009) are done to study social media. Dieter et al. (2019) suggests using multiple research personas in the walkthrough method to make it more like a comparative study. Through the use of multiple research personas during the walkthrough method, the researcher is challenged to look further at the other options or choices. When interested in playful identities, going through all available options is very useful.

Playful identities are studied for example by Jansz (2014) through a video-game analysis. Timmermans (2015) studies playful identities by introducing aspects of playfulness. These two examples show that it is interesting to look at methods that are used to study games and the concept of play. On another thought, behavioural design or dark pattern libraries (Dieter 2015; Nodder 2013) might be consulted to guide the analysis of formal components based on plotting user decision-making and actions. Because the walkthrough method by Light et al. (2018) mainly focuses on the desired behaviour, not the unexpected/contrary/playful choices that can be made. However, these playful choices are very important when wanting to study playful identities. To conclude, an adaptation of the existing walkthrough method is desirable in order to better understand online identities and playful identities within social media apps.

1.3 Main research question

The walkthrough method is the most suitable method to study social media apps with a focus on online identity construction. However, when researching social media apps with the intention to say something about playful behaviour of users with their online identity, the walkthrough method is too generic, which could give trouble and/or raise extra questions (Gerrard 2018, Dieter et al. 2019). This research therefore creates a solid and thorough basis of a new method (the Playful Identity Walkthrough), which is needed to maintain the essence of the walkthrough method. The focus lies on the integration of the existing method plus some new important elements of theory about online identity and playful behaviour. Important to note is that when creating a new mixed methods approach, scholars could risk skipping one or more of the core elements of the walkthrough method within the analysis. Therefore, this research will pay extra attention to all its elements, for the sake of coherence and comprehensiveness argued by Light et al. (2018; 2).

The main question of this research is; *What kind of new mixed methods approach based on the existing walkthrough method is necessary to gain insight into playful identities on social media apps?*

This research is structured according to three sub questions:

1. Which elements of theory about playful identity can enrich the walkthrough method and how? (Chapter 2)

2. Which structural adjustment(s) of the walkthrough method gain more insight into playful identities in social media apps? (Chapter 3)

3. How does the Playful Identity Walkthrough give insight into playful identities in social media apps? (Chapter 3 and 4)

1.4 Structure and process

Summed up, this research is an explorative research that has the main goal to propose a new mixed methods approach (the Playful Identity Walkthrough) to analyse social media apps with a focus on the possibilities for users to play with their online identity. More researchers are also asking the questions; how can we develop technical tools for analysing social media and which existing tools can we use? (Bredl, Hunniger and Jensen 2014; 1). In line with these questions is the goal of this research, namely, to create an innovative research method based on the existing walkthrough method (Light et al. 2018) and a theoretical framework about playful behaviour and online identity within social media apps.

The first step is to dive deeper into theory about online identity, playful behaviour and playful identity, to search for important elements to integrate within the existing walkthrough method (Light et al. 2018). The second step is bringing all these insights together and therefore to create a new mixed methods approach. The third and final step is to test this proposed Playful Identity Walkthrough on a case study, to show why and how this new mixed methods approach is useful for doing research. The social media app chosen for this test run is *TikTok* (ByteDance 2016). TikTok is a video-sharing social networking service. This test run will showcase a hands-on practice of the new method developed and described within this research. In figure 1 a schematic overview of these steps is shown.

2. The players

To better understand what the Playful Identity Walkthrough should look like it is necessary to understand more about online identity, playful identity and how this has already been studied in the past. Therefore, this chapter will discuss fundamental concepts and central arguments about identity construction, self-presentation and identity performance in section 2.1. Next, the concept of play and playfulness will be discussed in section 2.2. This will give insight into which elements of theory and/or other possible research methods should be incorporated within the Playful Identity Walkthrough. Final, in section 2.3 both subjects come together to discuss the concept of playful identity and how this phenomenon could be studied, which lays the groundwork for the description of the Playful Identity Walkthrough (chapter 3).

2.1 Online identity

Social media platforms can be characterized as digital intermediaries that negotiate between different stakeholders such as end-users, developers and advertisers which each come with their own aims and agendas (Gillespie 2010). Therefore, the fantasy of the single, verifiable identity that follows a user from site to site is very appealing to advertisers and data-collection companies (Marwick 2012; 357). Whereas, in the early years of social media, there was still a relative freedom in online presentation, platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn have gradually tweaked their interfaces and protocols not just to facilitate users, but also to serve businesses and advertisers (Van Dijck 2013; 204). Therefore, a company with access to your profile may get information on who your friends are, where you live, what your hobbies are, your age, education, etc. In short, information about your identity. However, since 2010 and the "open access" policy, designers were forced to implement some changes to limit users' visibility for the sake of their privacy and safety (Timmermans 2015; 286).

However, the technological affordances of particular types of social media constrain and enable different types of self-presentation (Marwick 2012; 357). For instance, user customization within social media platforms can be restricted primarily to filling out predefined fields (Marwick 2012; 359). This means the platform affordances determine which identity markers can be shared and which not. Therefore, there is the need to understand how individuals perform identity across social networks. Plus, it is needed to look at the ways in which specific online environments support or enhance social networking and how they provide opportunities for dispersed individuals to construct and negotiate identities (Merchant 2006; 242).

Standard features of typical social network sites are creating an (elaborate) personal profile, searching for and adding friends, and communicating with them (Timmermans 2015; 283). Marwick (2012) argues that one's identity is not a static object and that it is "flexible and changeable" (356). In addition, Gee (2004) is not assuming that there is a single essentialist identity; rather, he makes a distinction between one's "virtual identity" and one's "real-world identity" (112-13). Marwick (2012)

refers to this virtual identity with the term "online identity" which implies that there is a distinction between how people present themselves online and how they do offline (358). Elements from your real-world offline identity (identity markers) are being used to build your online identity (Merchant 2006).

The individual is active in producing and performing an ongoing narrative of the self (Merchant 2006; 238) and social network sites have become tools for this (personal) storytelling and narrative self-presentation (Van Dijck 2013; 200). Profile generation is an explicit act of writing oneself into being in a digital environment (boyd 2006). In addition to being a site of self-representation, profiles are a place where people gather to converse and share. As a result, participants do not have complete control over their self-representation (boyd 2010; 43). In addition, most social network sites provide various tools to support public or semi-public interactions between participants. A more commonly used tool for public encounters is the commenting feature that displays conversations on a person's profile. Comments are not simply a dialogue between two interlocutors, but a performance of social connection before a broader audience (boyd 2010; 45).

To study one's online identity, Van Dijck (2013) has done a comparative interface analysis, which aims to deconstruct the strategies of platforms to support the online self as a regulated product and suggests their cultural implications (201). Relevant is that Van Dijck (2013) argues that social media profiles are not a reflection of one's identity but are a "part of a power struggle between users, employers/employees and platform owners to steer online information and behaviour" (212). The Playful Identity Walkthrough should therefore aim to give insight into how the affordances of a social media app constrain the (playful) behaviour of users with their online identity.

Although different options to play with your online identity are available, they are constrained by the affordances of a particular medium (Merchant 2006; 237). When aiming to analyse the possibilities and constraints of social media apps, an affordance analysis (boyd 2010; Hutchby 2001) is obvious. The architecture of a particular environment matters, and the architecture of networked publics is shaped by their affordances (boyd 2010; 39-40). Understanding the properties, affordances, and dynamics common to networked publics provides a valuable framework for working out the logic of social practices (boyd 2010; 40). This is not to say that what emerges in social network sites is simply determined by the technical affordances. In essence, people are learning to work within the constraints and possibilities of mediated architecture, just as people have always learned to navigate structures as part of their daily lives (boyd 2010; 55). Therefore, an affordance analysis alone is not enough to study online identities.

2.2 Play

Within this research unintended use or playing with the affordances of the system is referred to with the term *playful behaviour,* which is closely linked to the concept of play. According to Raessens (2014) "digital technologies and play are closely linked within our contemporary media culture" (104). Since

our culture is becoming more playful (Raessens 2014), we have to start seeing social networks as a type of platform on which playful behaviour is happening more and more nowadays (Consalvo and Vázquez 2014; 1688). Many automated buttons can also be deliberately manipulated and played by users (Van Dijck 2013; 202). In addition, users have developed a keen understanding of these mechanisms and have learned to exploit these same algorithmic mechanisms for their own advantage. Think of users shaping their online identities in order to gain popularity and hopefully reach a comfortable level of recognition and connectedness (Van Dijck 2013; 203). Therefore, it is necessary to gain more knowledge about the possibilities for users to cheat with their online identity.

Vázquez and Consalvo (2015) argue that not only games, but also social media are the type of platform on which playful usage and cheating, also with our online identity, is happening more and more nowadays. They argue that many social network games push players to accumulate large numbers of 'friends' as part of the game, and that some players create phantom profiles in order to gain advantage (Vázquez and Consalvo 2015). Boyd (2010) confirms that there are participants who gregariously seek to add anyone to their list of friends. However, the majority of participants simply include all who they consider a part of their social world (boyd 2010; 44).

Within their study Vázquez and Consalvo (2015) have identified a group of respondents who defined cheating as playing outside the formal rules of the game. However, there is disagreement between players regarding what 'formal rules of the game' means. For some participants, the rules are determined by the Facebook Terms of Service, which can be linked to analysing the governance described by Light et al. (2018) in the walkthrough method, while for others the rules are more specifically the game's programmed or coded rules. Which are the affordances of platforms.

In addition, these affordances have turned free-form playfulness into more formalised games within social network sites (Werning 2018; 22). Meaning, social media apps also no longer allow a free form of playing with their online identity but tries to fix this playfulness within rules and affordances to normalise a certain behaviour. However, Sutton-Smith (1997) describes "the rules of the game are absolutely binding, but players can also bend the rules" (103). An affordance analysis will allow researchers to explore all possibilities and constraints within the app. Therefore, this research will seek for a new mixed method approach with elements of both the affordance analysis (Hutchby 2001) and game analysis (Jansz 2014).

Raessens (2014) explains that "when we play, we plunge enthusiastically into the world of the game, while at the same time we maintain a certain distance in relation to our own behaviour in play; this is why we can call that behaviour playful" (103). Meaning that users maintain a critical distance with respect to the rules. Furthermore, it allows us to see those rules as just the rules of the game, which are always open to adaptation (Raessens 2014). Therefore, understanding the affordances of any social media app as the rules of the game makes it possible to analyse any social media app as a platform which affords playful behaviour of its users. This results in, the lens of play being embedded within the Playful

Identity Walkthrough and several aspects of the game analysis method, like the analysis of game elements are implemented in order to analyse play aspects on social media apps.

2.3 Playful identity

The web, and in particular social network sites provide the perfect stage for people to apply playful, light, and frivolous self-presentations as a way of dealing with the utter seriousness and social pressure underlying the process of among others gaining status (Timmermans 2015; 288). However, there is a limit to this playfulness. For example, users may decide on the content of their profiles on Facebook, but they are certainly not free to redesign the software or tell Facebook what advertisers to allow on the site. Furthermore, important is the strong pressure to take part in social networking and to develop attractive and impressive personal profiles with preferably as many friends as possible (Timmermans 2015; 288). This connects to earlier discussion that users shape their online identities in order to gain popularity and hopefully reach a comfortable level of recognition and connectedness (Van Dijck 2013; 203). Therefore, I argue that this pressure provokes playful behaviour with social media users.

In addition, social media users are more or less "forced" into self-reflection by means of constructing personal profiles (Timmermans 2015; 288). These personal profiles allow users to reflect on themselves and their online identity, where a lack of contacts/friends on Facebook can be an important (negative) element of someone's self-understanding. In this respect Facebook resembles a competition with excellence in social realm as a goal (Timmermans 2015; 289). Collecting friends on social media can therefore be seen as a game asking their players to be playful. In addition, social media themselves can be seen as a game, because acting on them is characterized by a playful mood and has playful elements to it (humour, competition, teasing), but also because they constitute a world on their own (Timmermans 2015; 289). You can connect this to the argument Raessens (2014) has made, explained in section 2.2; in which he explains that playful behaviour happens because we dive into the world of the game while maintaining distance to our own behaviour in play. Therefore, social media can be seen as a world in which we can experiment and play a bit with our identity. Here is stated 'a bit' because app developers still try to fix this playfulness within rules and affordances, as mentioned also within the previous section.

People explore aspects of themselves by playing, even those aspects that are impossible or forbidden outside of the game, in order to test out the reactions of others (Jansz 2015; 263). Therefore, play has become part of shaping who we are and who we want to be. Social media apps have playful qualities and therefore shape identities in playful ways (de Lange et al. 2015; 263), because they invite users to playfully interact with each other and with the medium, while knowing the serious social mechanisms (e.g. connections with friends) that are at play. That is why we can conclude that social network sites are "serious games", which means the line between play and reality is inevitably blurred (Timmermans 2015; 290). Therefore, all online identities are to some degree playful identities, which is

why there is a need to study this phenomenon. Social network sites their affordance invite users to playfully interact with each other and with the medium (Timmermans 2015; 290).

2.4 Studying playful identities

Within 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 I have studied theory about online identities, play and playful identities. More importantly I have tried to better understand which methods are used and could be useful to further study the phenomenon of playful identities in social media apps. The walkthrough method (Light et al. 2018) provides a clear structure and allows the researcher to study the social media app from within. Which enables to better understand how data is collected and how the app interacts and influences the user. However, it does not go into depth into playful identities. Therefore, an affordance analysis (Hutchby 2001, boyd 2010) allows researchers to better understand the possibilities and constraints regarding users' online identity. However, boyd (2010) argues that what emerges in social network sites is simply determined by the technical affordances. Therefore, a game analysis is useful to be able to study game elements and understand the social media app through a lens of play. Concluding, I argue that an adjustment of the walkthrough method by Light et al. (2018) is the best way to study playful identities.

3. The strategy

In this chapter the Playful Identity Walkthrough will be introduced. First, I will explain and discuss the intended goal of this playful identity walkthrough (section 3.1), based on the theoretical framework in chapter 2. In section 3.1, I will also discuss which insights it should give. Second, a description of the new steps and adjustments of the original walkthrough method is explained (section 3.2). This chapter will give answer to the second sub question about which structural adjustment(s) of the walkthrough method gain more insight into playful identities in social media apps.

3.1 Intended goal

The Playful Identity Walkthrough I propose will enable scholars to analyse how playful behaviour of users with their online identity is made possible and desirable within social media apps. Based on previous chapters, 1 and 2, we now know what requires attention for studying playful identities within social media apps. The following three things ask for interventions to the existing walkthrough method of Light et al. (2018).

1. More attention to the balance between wat is made possible and what is made desirable within the app.

2. More attention to the process and elements that affects users' online identities (for example: the set-up of a user profile, how users play with their online identity, etc.) during the technical walkthrough.

3. More attention to how a playful environment is created within the app and how playful behaviour is being controlled and managed by the app's affordances during the technical walkthrough.

In section 3.2 a proposition is discussed how these three points of attention are integrated, with some adjustments and additions, into the walkthrough method to create the new Playful Identity Walkthrough. the new Playful Identity Walkthrough is discussed. Which is mostly based on the existing walkthrough method of Light et al. (2018), but includes some adjustments and additions. Chapter 4 discusses how this Playful Identity Walkthrough is being used to do a case study, which will show the use of the three interventions stated above.

1. More attention to how there is a balance between wat is made possible and what is made desirable within the app.

The Playful Identity Walkthrough aims to provide more insight into the possibilities and desirability's for users to play with their online identity within social media apps. In line with the walkthrough method (Light et al. 2018) this new method consists of the same two phases: (1) the environment of expected use and (2) the technical walkthrough. In phase 1, the environment of expected use, the app's vision, operating model and governance are being analysed, which results in the tools to analyse and therefore

better understand the cultural context of an app. The Playful Identity Walkthrough adds an element of balance to this first phase, which results in the tools to make a distinction between the desirability's (vision) and possibilities (governance) within social media apps. By this the most important values come to the surface, but also contradictions may become visible. These insights are valuable for the analysis of the technical walkthrough, because they guide the researcher towards frictions and help them to focus to further uncover and better understand the balance between the desirability's and possibilities. Altogether, this addition of the element of balance allows to critically analyse whether the vision and governance are in line with each other and what this means for the possibilities and constraints of the level of playfulness afforded within the social media app.

2. More attention to the process and elements that affects users' online identities during the technical walkthrough.
The technical walkthrough described by Light et al. (2018) has a goal to guide researchers through the app and to pay attention to the flow of the app. The Playful Identity Walkthrough urges scholars to only pay attention to the flow and process that influence the online identity of app users. The Playful Identity Walkthrough mostly follows the original walkthrough method by Light et al. (2018). The technical walkthrough they describe is performed and structured along three common stages: (1) registration and entry; (2) everyday use; (3) app suspension, closure and leaving. All three stages are of equal importance within the Playful Identity Walkthrough. However, the Playful Identity Walkthrough requests scholars to only focus on the process that affects users' online identities. For example, the set-up of a user's profile, how users play with their online identity in everyday practice and how one's profile is being removed out of the app when leaving / deleting the app. Relevant is that elements which influence users' online identity are not only demographics, filled in when setting up a profile, but also the post demographics that represent users' preferences and tastes.

However, not all of these elements that affect users their online identity will be (directly) visible when doing the technical walkthrough. Therefore, the Playful Identity Walkthrough urge to also focus on hidden affordances. Interesting is that often prior uses of walkthrough was to make implicit items explicit and to uncover hidden affordances (Light et al. 2018; 885). However, within the technical walkthrough of Light et al. (2018) the attention for hidden affordances is minimal. Therefore, the Playful Identity Walkthrough will focus on analysing the material traces of hidden affordances and tricks which could influence the online identity within the social media app.

3. More attention to how a playful environment is created and how playful behaviour is being controlled and managed by the app's affordances during the technical walkthrough.
Based on chapter 1, which critically discusses the walkthrough method by Light et al., we now know that this walkthrough method pays no attention to how users play with their online identity within social media apps. Based on the theory discussed in chapter 2, playful behaviour with users' online identity is

happening on social media. Since social media apps have playful qualities, the Playful Identity Walkthrough will need to focus on uncovering these playful qualities for analysis. This analysis will result in a better understanding of how a playful environment is created, which stimulates playful behaviour. To be able to find out how playful behaviour of users is being managed and controlled by the app's affordances the Playful Identity Walkthrough provides insight into how rules and other game-like/gamification elements are presented plus how a game-world may have been created within the social media app. Both insights contribute to a better understanding of the level of playfulness possible within the social media app.

In line with the walkthrough method (Light et al. 2018), the Playful Identity Walkthrough examines the interaction between the platform's affordances and its user. The walkthrough method asks researchers to keep a logbook, to keep track of the flow and interaction over time. However, the Playful Identity Walkthrough the logbook is discarded. Therefore, the technical walkthrough is more like an affordance analysis, as discussed in chapter 2. This will give more insight into the possibilities and constraints for users to play with their online identity. This does not automatically mean that playful behaviour with online identities does happen within the social media app, but that it is possible and made desirable by app developers. Since the Playful Identity Walkthrough has a more prominent role of the affordance theory, it will provide more specific tools to analyse the possibilities and constraints regarding one's playful identity.

3.2 The Playful Identity Walkthrough

As discussed in section 3.1, the Playful Identity Walkthrough mostly follows the structure of the walkthrough the method by Light et al. (2018). Therefore, this section (3.2) is divided into: (1) the environment of expected use with an addition of the balance-model, and (2) the technical walkthrough with an addition of two categories and a shift of focus.

The environment of expected use

Within the Playful Identity Walkthrough, you mostly follow the walkthrough method by Light et al. (2018) by first analysing an app's environment of expected use. This consists out of the following three things. (1) Vision: an app's vision tells users what it is supposed to do and, by extension, implies how it can be used and by whom. (2) Operating model: an app's operating model involves its business strategy and revenue sources, which indicate underlying political and economic interests. (3) Governance: an app's governance involves how the app's provider seeks to manage and regulate user activity to sustain their operating model and fulfil their *vision*. The Playful Identity Walkthrough adds a specific focus to this last point of how an app's governance fulfils the app's vision by asking the researcher to fill in a scheme. Within this scheme the app's vision and governance are placed next to each other. This creates a clear overview to be able to analyse and therefore better understand the balance

between the app's vision (desirability) and the app's governance (possibility). Other methods do not analyse this balance. In addition, this balance gives scholars a support and focus to better understand what needs to be further explored within the technical walkthrough.

The technical walkthrough

Firstly, the technical walkthrough method by Light et al. (2018) is performed and structured along three common stages: (1) registration and entry; (2) everyday use; (3) app suspension, closure and leaving. All three stages are of equal importance, however, the Playful Identity Walkthrough requests to only focus on the process that affects users' online identities. Therefore, within the first stage (registration and entry) most attention is payed to the construction of users' online identity, and within the second stage (everyday use) most attention is payed to elements that influence users' self-reflection and identity maintenance. For example, adding or changing a profile picture, adding friends and reflecting on your own popularity. The Playful Identity Walkthrough also urges to not forget to analyse the third and final stage (app suspension), because the ability to delete your account completely (without anything left present online) could stimulate playful behaviour.

Secondly, the Playful Identity Walkthrough does not ask the researcher to keep a logbook. This way the focus is more on the separate elements and actions than the flow and multiple steps within the social media app. Therefore, a logbook is not necessary. The Playful Identity Walkthrough is therefore more like an affordance analysis (discussed in chapter 2) which allows you to study the possibilities and constraints for users to play with their online identity. Every element gets the same amount of attention, and the researcher is challenged to try out every option with every element to better understand the possibilities to cheat.

Finally, the technical walkthrough by Light et al. (2018) consists out of four mediator characteristics: (1) user interface arrangement; (2) functions and features; (3) textual content and tone; and (4) symbolic representation. A fifth and a sixth mediator characteristic are being added within the Playful Identity Walkthrough: (5) hidden affordances and (6) game elements. When analysing hidden affordances, investigate options that are not immediately visible when users fill in their personal information but could be added by the user themselves later on. Maybe after completing a series of actions or reaching a satisfied number of social links. When analysing game elements, the Playful Identity Walkthrough proposes to pay attention to affordances that could create a game-like environment, such as rules, leader boards and a points-system. These game-elements could be disguised, for example a ranking of your most active followers could function as a leader board. With the addition of these two new categories, the Playful Identity Walkthrough gives more insight into the desirability's and possibilities for users to show playful behaviour with their online identity.

4. The game *(TikTok)*

In this chapter the playful identity walkthrough method is used to analyse the social media app *TikTok*. This will give a hands-on practice of the Playful Identity Walkthrough. The case selected is *TikTok*. This social media app is very popular this moment and its number of users is still growing. It is worthy to mention that, even though within this test run the app *TikTok* is being analysed, this Playful Identity Walkthrough method is suitable for analysing any social media app.

4.1 The environment of expected use

Vision

Within the *Google Playstore* the app *TikTok* is placed within the category of 'social'. The description of the app is: "Real people, real videos" [A], and when you click on the text the rest of the description is made visible. Most interesting is the statement: On *TikTok* short videos are exciting, spontaneous, and genuine. On their website is stated [B]: "Our mission is to inspire creativity and bring joy." This is accompanied by quotes like: "Make your day good", "The more you watch, the better it gets", "Be the first to discover", "Immediately entertaining", and "Make your own videos".
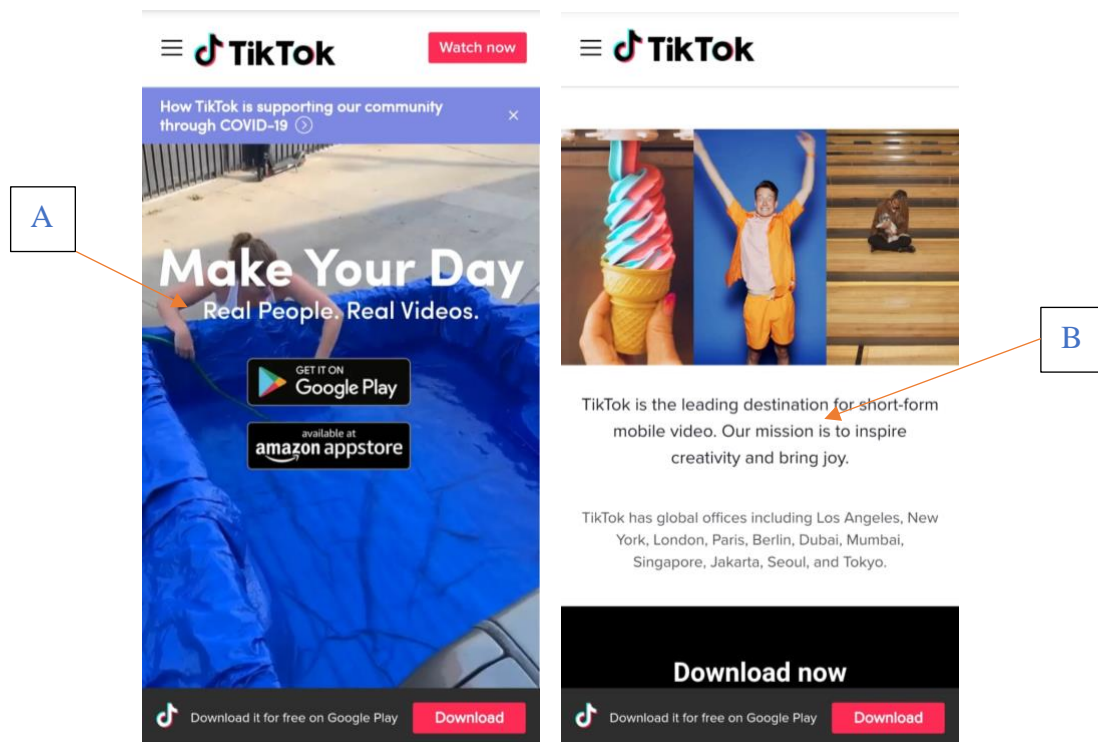

Image 1 & 2: TikTok website

The target user base of *TikTok* is not made explicit, except for the statement within the TOS (Terms of Service) that *TikTok* users should be 13 and over. The description of the app is: "Whether you're a sports fanatic, a pet enthusiast, or just looking for a laugh, there's something for everyone on

TikTok." This means they do not want to exclude any type of user. However, also the description is mentioning the following: "from your morning coffee to your afternoon errands, *TikTok* has the videos that are guaranteed to make your day." This addresses to a certain type of user that drinks morning coffees and makes afternoon errands. This group consists of working adults, that support themselves and or a family. Therefore, children and the elderly are not being addressed directly, which implicates they are not the target user base of *TikTok*.

  TikTok promotes itself by stating: "We make it easy for you to discover and create your own original videos by providing easy-to-use tools to view and capture your daily moments." This means they hope to gain information/data about people's daily activities. However, the following statement, which is placed directly after it, contradicts this: "Take your videos to the next level with special effects, filters, music, and more." This does not enhance the feeling of authenticity mentioned earlier as "real people, real videos". In addition, this feeling of authenticity also appears within the community guidelines: "*TikTok*'s mission is to inspire creativity and bring joy. We are building a global community where users can create and share authentically, discover the world around them, and connect with others across the globe." Community building is high on their list. Interesting is that creativity is being inspired. (Thin line between creativity and playfulness/cheating.) Furthermore, *TikTok* encourage users to celebrate what makes them unique, while finding a community that does the same.

Operating model

The app download is free but contains some in-app purchases. 1) Coins, which can be used to purchase virtual gifts and can only be used on the *TikTok* Platform as part of their services. 2) Gifts (or virtual gifts), which constitute a limited license to certain features of digital products and services. You may use gifts to rate or show your appreciation for an item of user content that is uploaded or streamed by another user (content provider). 3) Diamonds, which are a measurement of the popularity of the relevant user content. These diamonds are an incentive for users to stimulate activity among users and for users to make known their preferences (post demographics). In addition, the app's revenue also exists out of ads and partnerships. The app is collecting a lot of personal information which is and can be sold to third-parties. This means, users sharing their personal information within the *TikTok* platform is very important for its revenue. How this data is collected within the app is being analysed within the technical walkthrough.

Governance

TikTok users are informally encouraged to behave in ways that align with the norms and values. The following statement is made on the website (tiktok.com): "Our policies and guidelines exist to foster trust, respect, and a positive environment for everyone in this community. We trust all users to respect the community and keep *TikTok* fun and welcoming for everyone." Based on this, not only trust and respect seem important, but also fun. This is interesting, because what could be fun for someone, could

be not fun for others. How do you govern fun? This statement also implies that *TikTok* is already fun, and users should keep it this way. Fun is important, thus I will analyse within the technical walkthrough if play and playfulness are of equal importance.

Within the community guidelines and TOS (terms of service) some activities (discrimination, nudity, cyberbullying, etc.) are being discouraged and can be punished. Interesting is the description below the header "Impersonation, spam, scams, or other misleading content". Here TikTok state that creating fake identities is violation of the rules/guidelines. This makes it interesting to find out if and how it is made possible to create fake identities during the technical walkthrough. Since the governance of an app can also be hard-coded within the platform's affordances, we can have more insight into *TikTok*'s governance after the technical walkthrough.

Balance

To better understand the balance between the app's vision and governance the most important results are placed within figure 3. Interesting to see is that within the vision some people might feel excluded, but the governance clearly supports the norm that *TikTok* is for everyone. Within the vision it is made very important that *TikTok* has real people and real videos. The governance enhances this by making clear that impersonation and misleading content will not be tolerated within *TikTok*. Inspiring creativity is part of the app's vision. However, the app's governance forms some boundaries, for example no discrimination is being allowed. Furthermore, the app's vision supports exciting and spontaneous content from users, but the governance tries to keep *TikTok*'s environment respectful and positive. Altogether the app's vision and governance seem to be in balance.

Vision	Governance
For coffee drinking, afternoon errands making people	For everyone
Real people, real videos	No impersonation, no misleading content
Inspiring creativity	No discrimination, no nudity, etc.
Exciting and spontaneous	Respectful and positive environment

Figure 3: schematic overview of TikTok's balance

This new element of balance within the Playful Identity Walkthrough will give scholars new insights into which norms and values (based on the app's vision and governance) are in balance and which are not. This enables them to further explore these similarities and contradictions within the technical walkthrough. The researcher now knows what the rules are (based on the app's governance) and therefore knows what to do to break these rules. Interesting is to find out whether these affordances support these rules and desires from the app's vision and governance. Without this balance scholars would not have compared the app's vision and governance and therefore not know which possible

frictions are interesting to focus on during the technical walkthrough. Because this scheme gives a different look onto the intended user and user scenario's than the walkthrough method by Light et al. (2018), it allows scholars to better understand which behaviour is seen as unintended use and therefore playful behaviour within the app. Next paragraph will explain which insights the Playful Identity Walkthrough adds in contrast to the walkthrough method by Light et al..

Firstly, during *TikTok's* technical walkthrough, the researcher will have to pay attention to the safeguarding and stimulation of "real people and real videos" in the affordances of the app, and it will be interesting to discover how impersonation and misleading content is punished. Secondly, it is also interesting for the researcher to pay attention during the technical walkthrough of *TikTok* to how creativity is being inspired, within the constraints of the governance. Finally, these insights give the researcher the goal to find out where the line is between on the one hand an exciting and spontaneous and on the other hand a respectful and positive environment during the technical walkthrough of *TikTok*.

To conclude, the addition of analysing the balance of a social media app provides the tools to find out where to focus on during the technical walkthrough. Based on the balance of the app TikTok, the researcher gained understanding in which playful behaviour he should try within the technical walkthrough. This will not only give us a better understanding of the intended use, but also, in contrast to the walkthrough method by Light et al. (2018), a better understanding into the unintended use.

4.2 The technical walkthrough

The technical walkthrough of *TikTok* is divided into three stages, explained in section 3.2. These three stages are: 1) registration entry 2) everyday use and 3) app suspension and closure. During the technical walkthrough I will focus on the process and elements that could influence users' online identity. Besides the four mediator characteristics described by Light et al. (2018); 1 user interface arrangement, 2 functions and features, 3 textual content and tone, 4 symbol representations, the Playful Identity Walkthrough urges scholars to look for (5) hidden affordances and (6) game elements.

Registration and entry

For this research the app *TikTok* is downloaded from the Google Play store on an Android phone. Since this research is conducted in the Netherlands the app was originally in Dutch. Later on, this is changed to English within the settings. When opening the app for the first time users get the option to choose their interests to receive personalized video-recommendations (*image 3*). The answers were pre-coded in a list and users are not able to add their own personal interests. Therefore, this affordance fits within the mediator characteristics category of (2) functions and features. That makes the categories of 'Daily life', 'Comedy' and 'Film/TV/Studio' very important since these are on top of the list. This fits within the mediator characteristics category of (1) user interface arrangement. However, users can skip this option to choose their interests. The next screen (*image 4*) is a tutorial, with the text 'Swipe up' and

'Keep exploring more videos'. If users do not understand the text, there is also a moving icon of a hand swiping over a screen and the button with the text 'Start watching'.
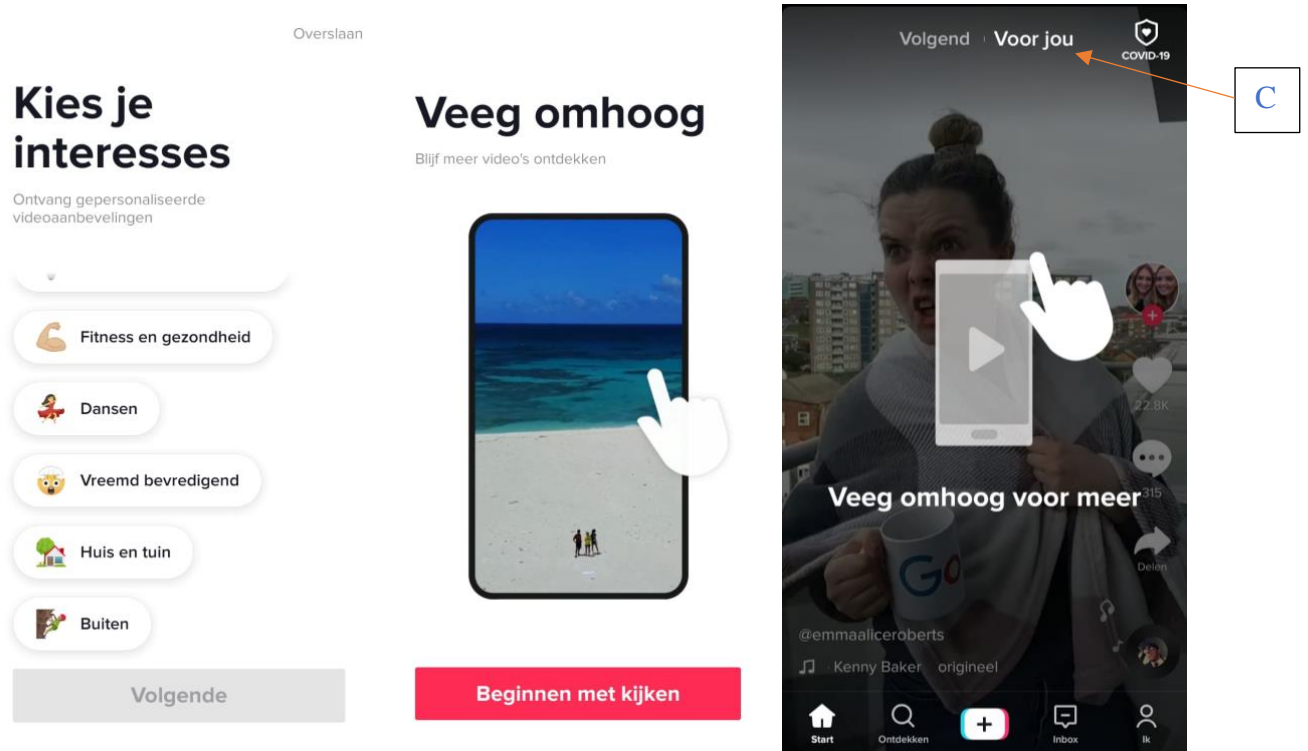

Image 3, 4 & 5: Entering TikTok for the first time

When users enter the *TikTok* environment (*image 5*), they see a big moving icon of a hand and the text 'Swipe up to see more' to instruct how this environment works. The fact that users immediately land within this area of videos is interesting, because it suggests that this is the most important thing and the expected user scenario. Users do not enter within their own profile page, which implies that watching videos is more desirable than maintaining a profile and online identity. On top of the screen [C] users see on the left 'Following' and on the right 'For You' (3 textual content and tone), so when swiping left and right users navigate between videos of accounts that they are following, and videos recommended for them. This means that TikTok is not only interested in users' demographics (age, sex, etc.) but also in users' post-demographics. Namely, their activities and preferences.

In chapter 2 this phenomenon is explained by Rogers (2013). He argues that more information is not only being asked of users but also that more information about users' preferences are being collected and stored. After setting up a profile, the platforms continually encourage more activity (adding friends, liking content and joining groups). Based on this example of TikTok and the Playful Identity Walkthrough we now understand that collecting these post-demographics is done more secretly then asking about your age (as we will discuss later on in this chapter). Analysing these hidden affordances through the Playful Identity Walkthrough helps us to understand that users may not be aware of their post-demographics that are collected within TikTok.
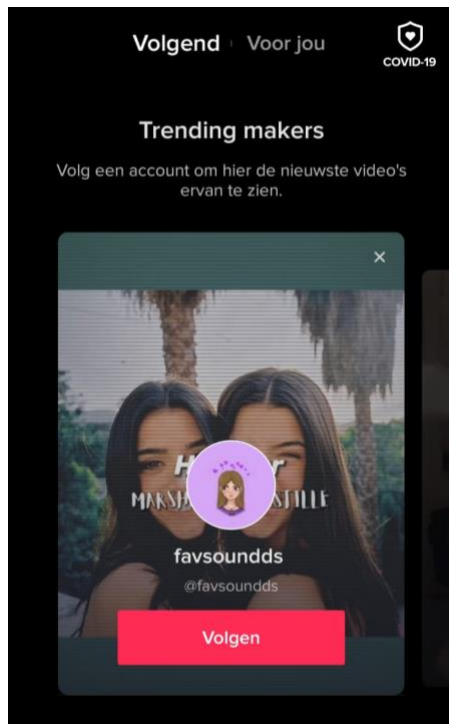
Image 6: TikTok trending makers

Subsequently, users are being introduced to some of the trending makers within *TikTok* (*image 6*). You can see a background picture, with the profile picture and their username, below this is a big red button with the text 'Follow'. This means, the app developers expected users to follow the (same) trending makers. It is not about finding the hidden gem, but all following the same big influencers. The button that immediately catches users their eye is the '+' in the centre bottom of the screen (1 user interface arrangement) which is the most prominent place on a smartphones screen. Tapping on the button takes users within the process of creating a video. Users could be curious and/or happy to be able to create a video without having to go through registration and a lot of boring questions and boxes to fill in. They can immediately get started (*image 7*).

Making the video, however, is very difficult the first time and rather time consuming. Users really have to think about the concept, because the possibilities of editing are endless. The amount of filter, effects and stickers are enormous. So, after 15 minutes of making the video it is likely that users get frustrated when you cannot upload it without being logged into an account (*image 8* and *9*). This means that posting something completely anonymous is not allowed / afforded within the *TikTok* environment. This fits the category of hidden affordances, as it requires a lot of actions from the researcher before finding out that an account is necessary to be able to post something on *TikTok*. App developers could have made this clear in earlier stages of the process or ask every user to first create an account. However, they have chosen to first get the users participating and then ask them to create an account.
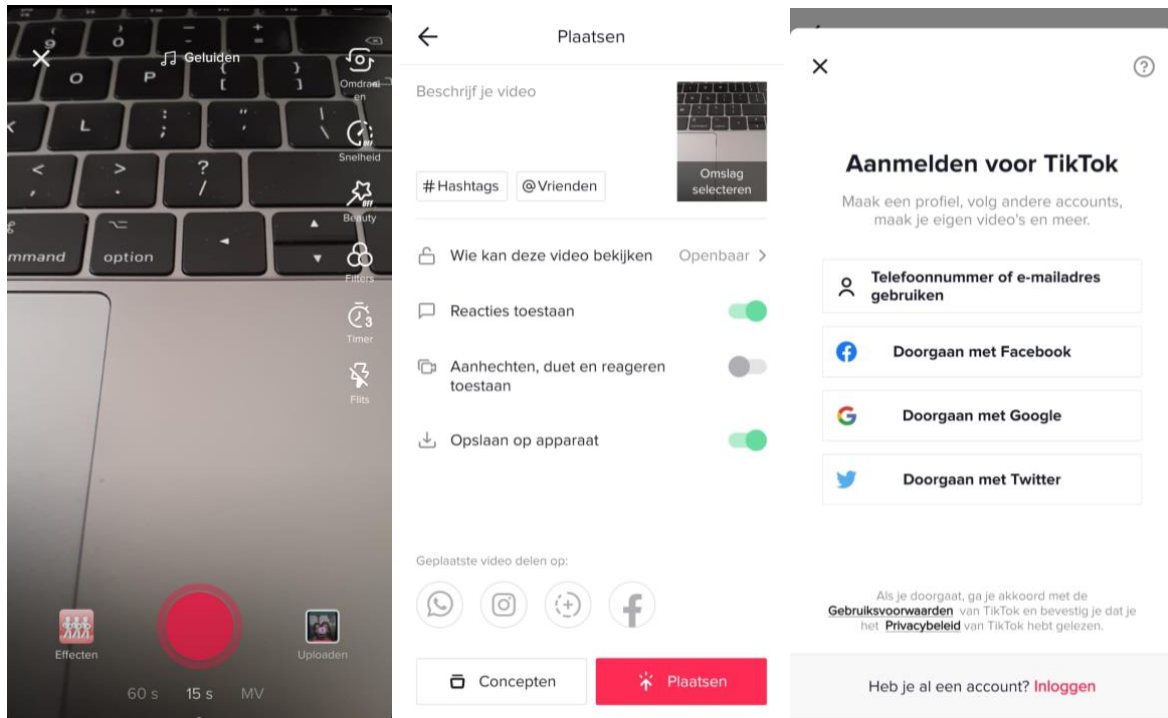
Image 7, 8 & 9: Making and posting a video without an account

The Playful Identity Walkthrough focuses on the actions and elements that influence users' online identity, insights are gained into the ways in which social media apps provide opportunities for users to construct and negotiate identities. TikTok users are recommended to register to be able to make a profile, follow other accounts, make thier own videos and more. They have the options: 'Using your phone-number or mail address', 'Continue with Facebook', 'Continue with Google' or 'Continue with Twitter'. Furthermore, stated in a very small font size: 'When continuing you agree with the Terms of Service (TOS) and have read the privacy statement'. Next users are asked to fill in their date of birth. It is made clear that your date of birth is not publicly displayed [D]. Based on the insights of prior analyses of the app's vision, governance and balance, it is interesting to find out what happens if someone is playful when filling in your age. It would be fun (in line with the app's vision) if I could fill in an age of 2 weeks. However, when filling in a date that makes you under the age of 13 (*image 10*) you get the reaction 'Sorry, looks like you're not eligible for *TikTok* .. But thanks for checking us out!' [E]. Changing the date to make yourself older does not work (in line with the app's governance), users keep getting the same message even when making themselves fifty years old (*image 11*). So, children below 13 are not allowed the make an account in *TikTok*. However, they are allowed to scroll through the video's others have posted, because this does not require having an account.
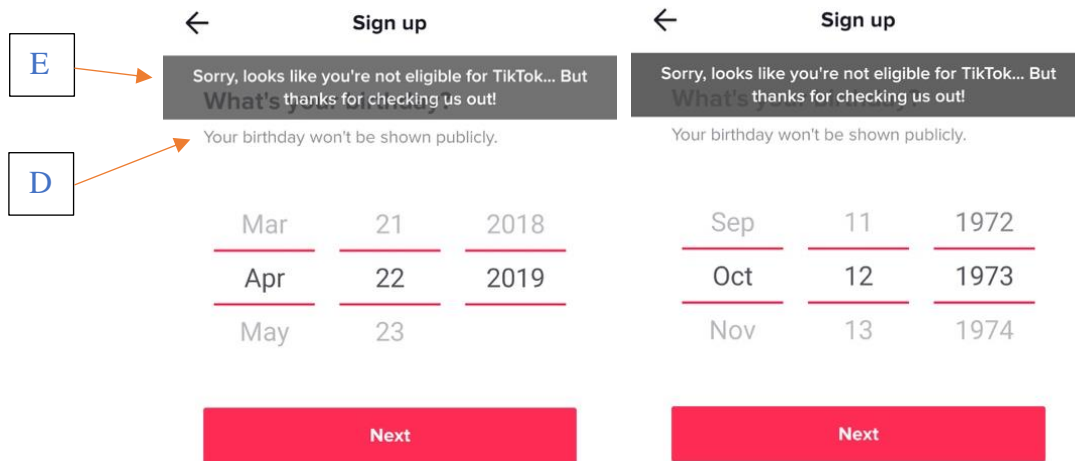
Image 10 & 11: Signing up in TikTok (date of birth)

Next, users are asked to continue with inserting their phone number (option 1) or e-mail address (option 2). Since option 1 is on the left and users have to do an extra act (swipe) to choose for option 2, registration with your phone number is more desirable than via an e-mail address. Remarkable is that after registering with an e-mail address, users do not receive any mail, no welcome message and not even a message to verify their account and to prove the e-mail address exists and belongs to them. This makes the *TikTok* app completely self-contained. Only a mobile phone is necessary.

Next step is making a password and choosing a username (*image 12*). The app mentions that users are able to change this anytime later. Which is important because one's identity is not static but is flexible and changeable (Marwick 2012; 356). Interesting is that there is already filled in a username based on the e-mail address users have filled in. Users are able to skip this step but can also decide to change it into something more anonymous (*image 13*). Therefore, one could argue that having a real name is more desirable but having a more anonymous name is made possible, which is not in line with the app's balance between the app's vision and governance ("real people"). This was the final step of registration.
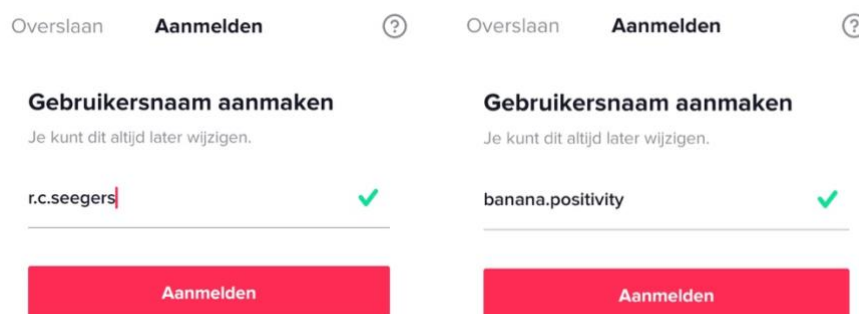

Image 12 & 13: Signing up in TikTok (username)

Everyday use

The overall look-and-feel within the *TikTok* app is simple and focusses on the videos. The font that is used is a Sans Serif font and is not predominant. Navigation within the app is mostly through swiping. The videos are made most important since these are full screen. Users are able to watch only one video at the time within the 'Home' environment. In the right corner users can see an icon of an LP playing with moving musical notes, to give users a sense that music is playing.
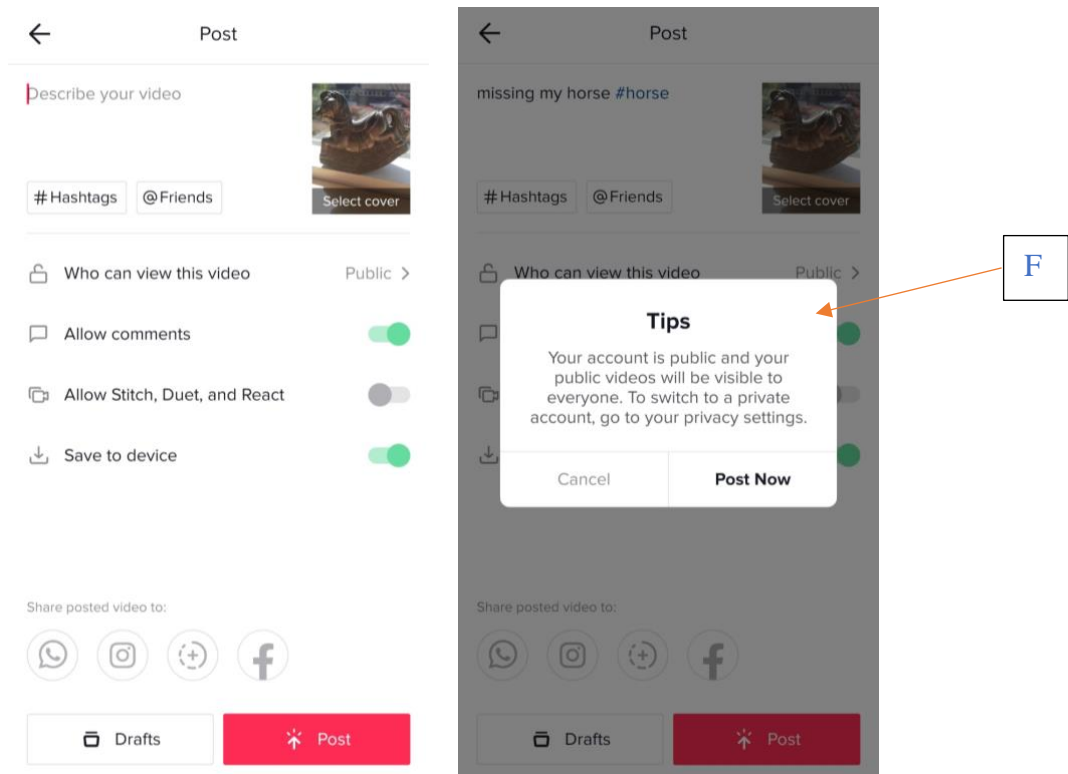

Image 14 & 15: Posting a video publicly on TikTok

As described before, the functional affordances of the app make it impossible to post a video without being logged into an account. This does not mean that users cannot post a video semi-anonymous. When users have chosen a random username, have not uploaded a profile picture and have not verified their e-mail address, users are still able to post a video while keeping their real identity a secret. It is important to make sure that users have not chosen the option to connect their *TikTok* account with their Facebook, Google or Twitter account. After recording a video and adding effects music and text, and not having changed the settings (*image 14*), users get a recommendation when pressing the 'Post' button (*image 15*). Within the pop-up screen [F] is stated 'Tips, your account is public, and your public videos will be visible to everyone. To switch to a private account, go to your privacy settings'. This pop-up screen and tone of voice of the message implies that posting a public video on a public account is something you should rather not do. This hidden affordance (pop-up screen) could be

overlooked by researchers who do not focus on unintended use and only on intended use based on the walkthrough method by Light et al. (2018).

Interesting is that the functional affordances of making and posting a private video that is only visible to yourself, makes the *TikTok* platform not only a shared experience but also a personal experience. Users are also able to only themselves see which videos they liked (it is changeable within the settings). This supports self-reflection within the *TikTok* app. What you liked is shown to users, so they can see what their personal preferences are, so they get to reflect on their online identity. Because of the Playful Identity Walkthrough, a deeper and better understanding is created of how users' online identity is being managed and controlled through the affordances of an app. For example, we now know that within *TikTok* your activity (post demographics) is more important than your personal information.
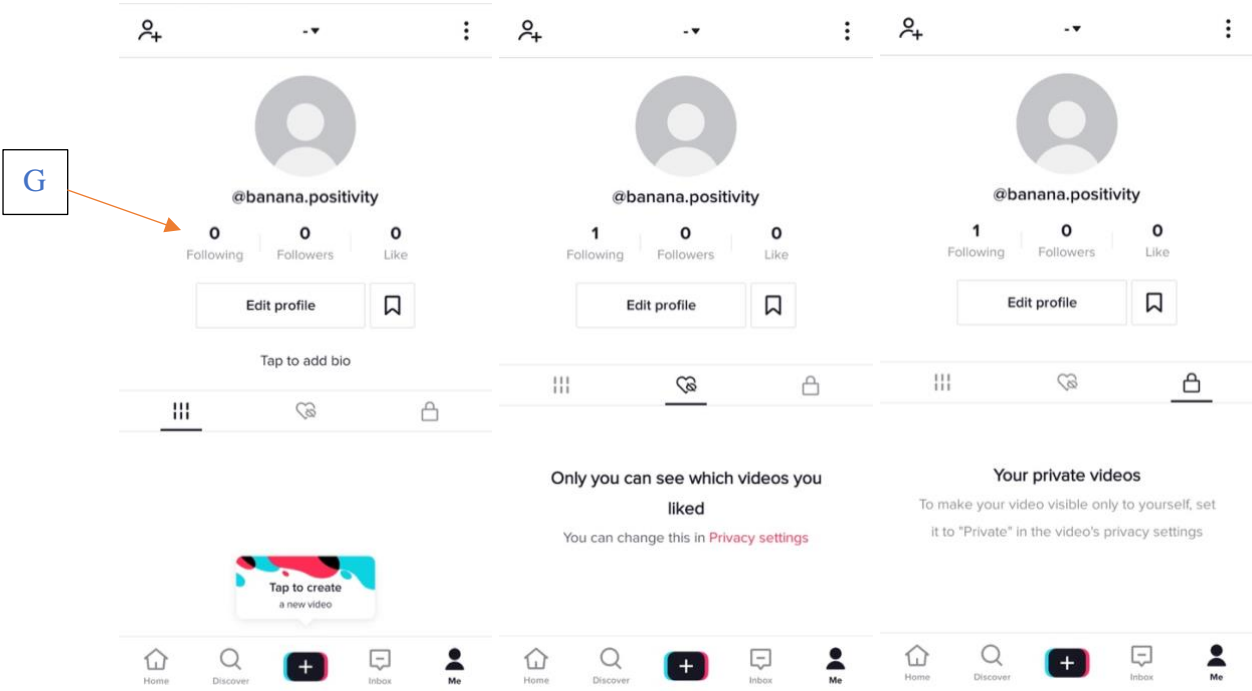
Image 16, 17 & 18: My account in TikTok

Since the app's affordances determine which identity markers can be shared with others, these affordances manage how someone's online identity is being constructed and presented within the app. Within *TikTok*, users their profile picture, username, number of followings, number of followers and number of received likes [G] are presented as very important elements that represent one's online identity. When looking at this from a playful perspective you could argue that these (number of followings, number of followers and number of received likes) are the "points" users want to collect. This fits within the category of game elements, because it functions as a points system which could influence users' online identity and self-reflection. In contrast to for example *LinkedIn* (2009), *TikTok* does not show profile pictures of your followers (called connections in *LinkedIn*). This makes

the number of followers more important than who your followers are. This could steer user's behaviour within the app. When looking at their own profile (*image 16, 17* and *18*) users are also confronted with these elements (profile picture, username, number of followings, number of followers and number of received likes), which has impact on users' self-reflection. A large number of followers could compensate a small number of received likes and vice versa. But a small number in all three categories could result in a negative self-image.

Based on the theory discussed in chapter 2, social media users are shaping their online identities in order to gain popularity and hopefully reach a comfortable level of recognition and connectedness (Van Dijck 2013; 203). Based on the results of this technical walkthrough of the Playful Identity Walkthrough, we now understand that TikTok supports this playful behaviour. They use this drive to collect as much friends and connections as possible, to collect more data about users' preferences. TikTok makes it a game / fun-factor to collect friends and followers. The Playful Walkthrough Method focuses on these game elements and therefore uncovers these insights to better understand why users show playful behaviour when shaping their online identity.
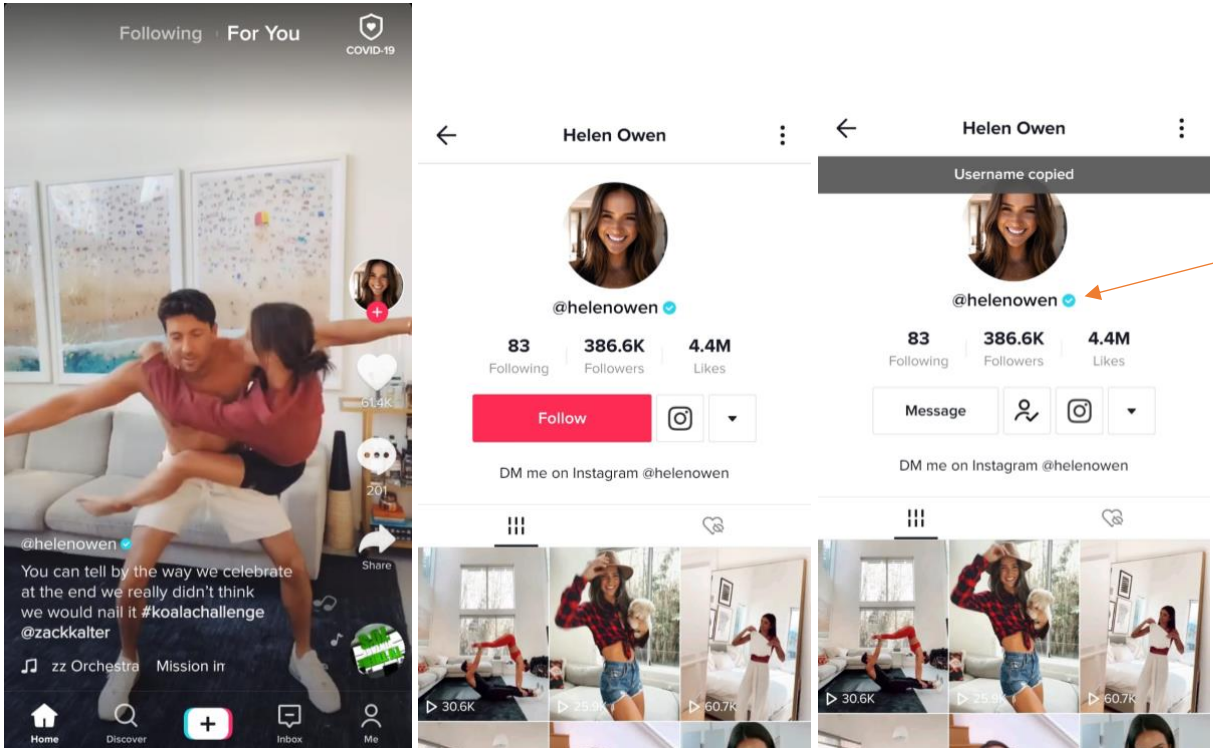

Image 19, 20 & 21: Verified account (Helen Owen) on TikTok

When looking at someone else's account (*image 20* and *21*) one can see these same elements (profile picture, username, number of followings, number of followers and number of received likes) plus a few additional buttons ('Message', 'Unfollow', 'Instagram-logo', and 'Suggested accounts'). Noticeable are the blue and orange check-box behind someone's name [H]. *TikTok* thought it was sensible to roll out a verification program to make sure their users are dealing with real and authentic

people. There are two kind of verified profiles: verified users (blue check-box) and popular creators (orange check-box). To be a verified user, you need to be a celebrity. *TikTok* provides verified badges to help users make informed choices about the accounts they choose to follow. It helps to build trust among high profile accounts and their followers. However, anyone can get a popular creator badge who has a considerable number of followers on *TikTok*. It matters more how many views someone's videos get and how active someone is on *TikTok* every day. The *TikTok* team continuously checks popular accounts to verify if they are eligible for a popular creator badge. There is no option available to request for the popular creator badge (Vedb 2020).

If you compare this with the balance (described in 4.1) "real people", it fits in well with the vision to show real people. The blue verified badge shows which celebrities are the real ones on TikTok. Only the orange popular badge has a completely different function. Namely as a badge / collector's item / game element. So that users become more active on the app, so that the app can collect more data. The Playful Identity Walkthrough requires attention from the researcher by paying attention to game elements (six mediator characteristic). But also to better understand the influence of these affordances on the formation and maintenance of users' online identity.
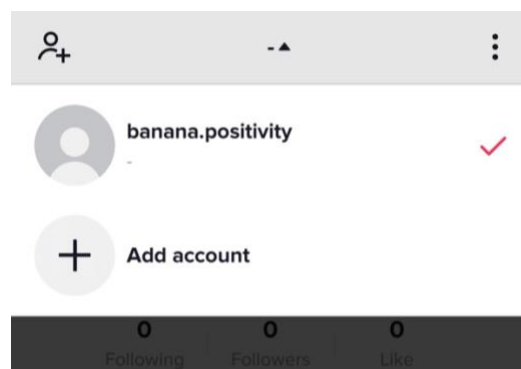

Image 22: Multiple accounts

Through the Playful Identity Walkthrough is found out that *TikTok* users can change their profile any time and can have three different accounts within one profile. Based on this can be concluded that *TikTok's* affordances are not supporting the fantasy of the single, verifiable identity that is very appealing to advertisers and data-collection companies (Marwick 2012; 357). The Playful Identity Walkthrough uncovers which play-options with users' online identity are available and how they are constrained by the affordances of a particular medium. Users can play around with this by creating multiple accounts with multiple preferences. So, you can be someone who loves animals and babies, and in the other account someone who likes sports and dangerous stunts. Compared with the app's balance (4.1) there is a contradiction. The balance concludes that authenticity is very important, while in this technical walkthrough is concluded that users are able to have multiple personalities.

When keeping your profile information low, you do not get any push-messages, e-mails or pop-up messages to update your profile and to fill in every field. For example, in contrast to *LinkedIn*, where users see a progress-bar (game element) and get pop-up messages in which they are asked to fill in as much info about themselves as possible, and to keep their profile as up-to-date as possible. Interesting is that *TikTok* does not do this, your activity (post demographics) seems therefore more important than your personal information.
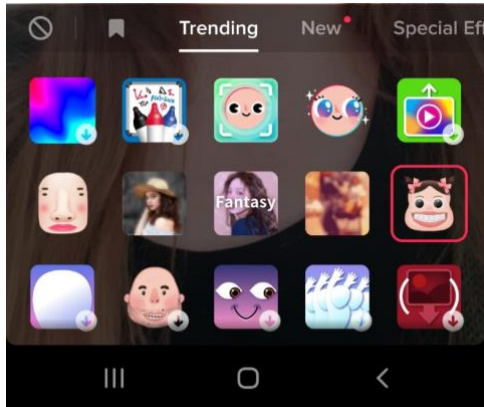

Image 23: TikTok filters/effects

In the community guidelines and on the website, it is mentioned several times that the *TikTok* app shows real people and real videos. In contrast to this, is the large number of filters and effects (*image 23*) users can add to their video. Interestingly, not all of these filters make people prettier or better looking. Some of the filters/effects make you look older or distorts your face or body in a funny way. This is in line with *TikTok*'s vision to be fun.

When not having your *TikTok* account connected with Facebook, Google, Twitter or Instagram, you can create a different identity within your *TikTok* profile. Therefore, when breaking a rule, you can only be punished within the *TikTok* environment and not outside of it. This creates a closed environment separated from the real world, in which users can play with their identity without worrying about real-life consequences. This could stimulate playful behaviour and fits within the media characteristics category of game elements, because it creates a game-like environment closed off from the real world, which could influence users' online identity.

Social networking, collecting friends and gaining status is very important within *TikTok*. There is a strong pressure to take part in social networking and to develop attractive and impressive personal profiles with preferably as many friends as possible. On every page the user gets the option to follow other profiles. In contrast to *LinkedIn*, adding friends/followings on *TikTok* is not a mutual connection. Profile A can follow profile B, but profile B does not have to follow profile A. In addition, you do not have to ask for permission to follow someone, and you can also not decide whether someone is not allowed to follow you. This influences the number of followers, because it is easy for users to just follow everyone. It is only one click on the button. This contradicts the argument of boyd (2010) that most social network sites require connections to be mutually confirmed before being displayed (44).

Therefore, it is necessary to gain more knowledge about the possibilities for users to cheat with their online identity. These disclose the possibilities for users to cheat with their online identity within the app. Understanding and seeing the number of friends as a game element, allows scholars to pay more attention to how this number is presented to other users and themselves. For example, based on the test run, we now know that TikTok values the number of followers just as much as the number of followings. However, users could earn a reward (popular creator badge) when reaching a high number of followers.

When looking at this from a playful perspective you could argue that this number of followers is something that users want to collect. A low number could result in a negative self-image. This would not have shown by using only the walkthrough method by Light et al., because within the four mediator characteristic categories there is no encouragement to think of affordances in a playful way.

During the technical walkthrough attention is also paid to typical features of a game linked with users' online identity. There is not something functioning as a leader board, levels or progress bar within *TikTok* (game elements). The videos of a search result are shown in random order. All videos do have a high rate of likes, but the order is still random. This means that the user interface arrangement does not make competition a big thing for users, and competition is therefore not made desirable by the developers of *TikTok*. You could get rewarded with a popular creator badge (game element), but it is not made explicit when you get this. The app made playful because the affordances leave room for humour and fun, but no competition is being urged. Playfulness from users is made desirable for the functioning and purpose of the app to support the app's vision and balance of being fun.

Since social media apps also no longer allow a free form of playing with their online identity but try to fix this playfulness within rules and affordances to normalize a certain behaviour (Werning 2018; 22), the sixth mediator characteristic (game elements) is added within the Playful Identity Walkthrough. This allows scholars to better understand which affordances are affording or constraining the playful behaviour of users with their online identity. It also allows us to uncover into how a game-world is created within the social media apps. This allows users to play while at the same time maintaining a certain distance in relation to their own behaviour in play (Raessens 2014; 103). The Playful Identity Walkthrough allows researchers to not only identify game elements, but also to better understand what influence they have on shaping users' online identity. This allows us to better understand the phenomenon of playful identity.

TikTok's vision is to show users their daily activities via videos. However, there are a lot of challenges going around on *TikTok* to fight the boredom of users' daily life. These videos do not give a realistic impression of user's daily life, like coffee drinking and afternoon errands like they promised on their website and is therefore not in line with the app's balance discussed with the environment of expected use. The potential role the *TikTok* app plays in users' lives is to inspire creativity. Since everyone uses the same music and the same moves, how do you stand out? Uniqueness and creativity are very important. You have to bring your own personality to the stage. You have to try to stand out. Furthermore, interesting is that no impersonation is allowed (governance) and *TikTok* has 'real people and real videos' (vision). However, when walking through the app strikingly impersonation is happening a lot. User are imitating each other and using voice-overs a lot. The functional affordances (2 functions and features) to use someone else's voice (for example from celebrities) in connection with your face supports the process of impersonation. In addition, the huge amount effects and filters within the *TikTok* app contribute to the possibility for users to wear a mask. This makes it feel like users are staging a play, which is not in line with *TikTok*'s vision, governance and balance to show real people and real videos.

The Playful Identity Walkthrough provides the tools for scholars to lay connections between the app's vision, governance and technical walkthrough. For example, based on the test run we now know that no impersonation is allowed (governance) and *TikTok* has 'real people and real videos' (vision). However, the huge amount effects and filters within the *TikTok* app contribute to the possibility for users to wear a mask. This feels like users are staging a play, which is not in line with *TikTok*'s vision to show real people and real videos. The addition of the element of balance during the analysis of the environment of expected use therefore makes the Playful Identity Walkthrough more valuable to study to desirability's and possibilities of playful identities in social media apps.

App suspension, closure and leaving

After clicking on the button 'Delete my account' users need to fill in their password for verification. The next screen informs you about what happens if you delete your account. Most important and noticeable is the following statement: 'Information that is not stored in your account, such as chat messages, may still be visible to others'. This means when posting a chat message, users could later regret, users are not able to delete this, not even when deleting their account. Researchers will only find this hidden affordance when deleting the account and carefully read the information. This hidden affordance creates extra caution of users when chatting with other users. However, since there is the option to delete videos permanently after deleting their account, being more creative and playful within a video to test out reactions from other users is being stimulated through the app's affordances. However, boyd (2010) argues that users should be careful. Of course, while original records and duplicated records can in theory be deleted (or, technically, overwritten) at any point in the process, it is made very difficult since networked technology is making recording a common practice (boyd 2010; 47).

The test run of *TikTok* disclosed that when breaking a rule, you can only be punished within the *TikTok* environment and not outside of it. *TikTok* creates a closed environment separated from the real world, in which users can play with their identity without worrying about real-life consequences. This stimulates playful behaviour of its users. This creates that game-world that is not linked with the real world and therefore allows users to explore aspects of themselves by playing, even those aspects that are impossible or forbidden outside of the game, in order to test out the reactions of others (Jansz 2015; 263). The combination of adding analysing game elements and the element of balance within the Playful Identity Walkthrough provides tools to study where the borders between this game world and real world are and how it affects users' playful behaviour with their online identity. So, content shared publicly or only with followers allows a more free-form playfulness (because it is reversable) than chatting one-on-one (which is irreversible). These hidden functional affordances support a creative and playful culture within *TikTok*.

5. The results

The main question of this research is: *What kind of new mixed methods approach based on the existing walkthrough method is necessary to gain insight into playful identities on social media apps?* The answer to this question is that the Playful Identity Walkthrough allow scholars to dive deeper into the phenomena of playful identities to gain more knowledge about the role app developers and an app's affordances have in constructing and maintaining playful identities within social media apps. The Playful Identity Walkthrough is different from the walkthrough method by Light et al. (2018) in three ways:

1. It pays more attention to the balance between what is made possible and what is made desirable within the app.
2. It pays more attention to the process and elements that affects users' online identities (for example: the set-up of a user profile, how users play with their online identity, etc.) during the technical walkthrough.
3. It pays more attention to how a playful environment is created and how playful behaviour is being controlled and managed by the app's affordances during the technical walkthrough.

This has led to the addition of the following things and shifts of focus. Firstly, the app's balance which is based on the app's vision and governance is added to the environment of expected use. Secondly, the overall focus during the technical walkthrough should be on the process and elements that could influence the users' online identity. Finally, the category of hidden affordances and game elements are added to the already existing four mediator characteristics during the technical walkthrough.

This new element of balance within the Playful Identity Walkthrough give scholars new insights into which norms and values based on the app's vision and governance are in balance and which are not. For example, the uneven balance between inspiring fun and creativity on the one hand and promising real people and real videos on the other hand within *TikTok*. This enables scholars to further explore these similarities and contradictions within the technical walkthrough. For example, the affordance to choose an anonymous username and profile picture, which allows TikTok users to be more creative and playful. The addition of hidden affordance allows scholars to search deeper within the app's affordances and ask scholars to experiment to see past the obvious. For example, the hidden affordance within *TikTok* that allows users to block other accounts. This impacts users' behaviour and therefore influences users' online identity. The addition of a focus on game elements within the technical walkthrough supports and inspires scholars to think of an app's affordances in a different, more playful way. For example, the game of collecting as many friends as possible to get a reward, a popular creator's badge.

Based on this research I conclude that the proposed new method, the Playful Identity Walkthrough, gives scholars much needed tools to analyse playful behaviour with online identities within social media apps. In chapter 1 the pros and cons of the walkthrough method by Light et al.

(2018) are discussed. They result in the creation of the Playful Identity Walkthrough to better understand the phenomenon of playful identity. The theoretical framework discussed in chapter 2 explains the necessary elements and theory for this new method. Chapter 3 discussed the Playful Identity Walkthrough in detail. The test run of the social media app *TikTok,* as described in chapter 4, shows that these playful affordances affect the way users construct and maintain their online identity. For example, the ability to have three different profiles within one account on *TikTok*, supports the desire of users trying out different kind of online identities, playing with them and testing them out. This affordance supports playful behaviour with users' online identity.

In conclusion, the Playful Identity Walkthrough gives hidden affordances and game elements a more prominent role within the analysis by asking to analyse the balance between the app's vision, governance and technical walkthrough more critically than is described in the walkthrough method by Light et al. (2018). Further research could be done into the integration of gamification and more game elements into this new proposed methodology. This could add interesting insights into the use of game elements within social media, which slightly touches the purpose of this research but could be reviewed and incorporated more within the Playful Identity Walkthrough. I hope this research inspires others to do further research into this phenomenon of playful identities within social media apps and finding the right tools and creating the right method to analyse this.

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All screenshots are made by the author on April 21, 2020.